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THE GENESIS OF THE ANCIENT CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF THE FUTURE LIFE

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The conquests of ancient Rome were attended by consequences of far greater import to the peoples concerned than their mere union under one central government. It broke down national and social boundaries, united far-separated peoples in commercial intercourse, mingled their blood, and hastened the fusion of customs, ideas, and religious beliefs that had begun in the conquests of the ancient eastern empires and that was carried farther by the great Alexander.

In no particular were the changes more deeply felt than in the realm of religion. Deprived of political support, the current faiths had to depend on their own inherent force, except in the case of those maintained by Rome. Religion became more a matter of individual conviction.¹ The flow of population to Rome and the other chief cities bore thither the mystical and passionate piety of the Orient and subjected the formal and cold Roman religion to a strain that it was unfitted to endure; for the East cultivated religion for its own sake. Roman religion became gradually transformed. Asia gave to Rome its Attis and Cybele, Egypt its Isis and Serapis (Osiris-Apis), Syria its Baal and Astarte, Persia its Mithra, though often with altered names. The outcome on the whole was good—a widespread religious awakening. The skepticism which the popular Greek and Roman faiths, and even Platonism and Stoicism with all their intellectual or moral grandeur, had been unable to resist, yielded to those mystic cults that appealed to the deeper emotions which are stirred by the promise of participation in the hidden secrets of the spirit-forces of the world.²

¹ See Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (trans. by Showerman), Preface, p. xxii *et passim*.

² Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Eng. trans., I, 116 ff. *et passim*.

More potent mysteries than those of Eleusis assured to men the gift for which the Greeks had sought in vain—incorruption, immortality. The Egyptian worship of Osiris would impart union with divinity and the Syrian and Persian sacrifices would bring life out of death. We shall see that one type of the Catholic doctrine of the future life finds rootage here.

In the general diffusion of races and religions the Jews were significantly prominent. Even their great possession, the conviction of the unity, spirituality, and morality of God, was not attained independently of contact with these other peoples. In the times immediately preceding the Christian era their religion, especially among the diaspora, had been subjected to a development in the direction of universality and a vivid expectation of the end of earthly things, a resurrection, a judgment, and renovated world.³ Here the Jewish faith found affiliation with the great oriental cosmogonies with their florid representations of cosmic processes as the activities of semi-personal beings. Greek philosophy had also worked its way into the Jewish mind, especially in Alexandria, where Philo sought to interpret their scriptures in the terms of Platonic philosophy. Judaism, then, was being transformed.⁴ Syncretism in religion prevailed generally in the Graeco-Roman world.

It must be remembered, however, that the powerful moral tone of Judaism was still a mighty force and met a hearty response in the Roman veneration of law and the stern Stoic philosophy. It became one of the principal influences formative of Christian doctrine.

It was in the midst of these conditions Christianity was born. Historically and inwardly more closely related to Judaism than to any other faith, it was natural that its first utterances should be in the Jewish forms. It was a message of salvation. The Jewish mind construed the Christian salvation as future and clothed the new hope in the language of Jewish eschatology. But the personality of the Christ soon appealed to the yearnings of the religious spirit of the Gentile world and the Christian faith began

³ R. H. Charles, *Eschatology, Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, esp. chaps. v-viii.

⁴ James Drummond, *Philo Judaeus*; Harnack, *op. cit.*, I, 99-116.

to gather about itself the distinctively spiritual elements of the other religions and to find in their conceptions an expression of its own nature. And so it came about that the new faith found utterance and attempted to vindicate itself in the language of Jewish hope, Graeco-Roman moral philosophy, and oriental speculations. The danger was that in the confusion its peculiar character should be lost to view.

The sufferings, moral confusion, and social distress of those times tended to focus attention upon the single question of a higher life for man beyond the weakness, ignorance, pain, and sin of the present. It was the effort of the early Christian thinkers to set forth and vindicate the Christian answer to this question that constituted the foundation of the whole superstructure of religious doctrine in the Nicene age. The doctrinal formulations of this period were mostly of empirical origin, the Alexandrian school alone attempting a systematic statement of the faith; yet it is possible to distinguish three marked types of theology respecting last things according as one or another element of the Christian faith was central.

The first type of theory of the future life that meets us is the apocalyptical. The vivid Hebrew prophetic pictures of the future age and the visions of the Jewish apocalyptists were appropriated by Christianity and denied to the Jew. They presented the imminent end of the present order in which the righteous (Jews) are oppressed by the wicked (Gentiles); the sudden manifestation of Jehovah from on high to save and to judge; a great cataclysm in which heaven and earth should be consumed by fire; the destruction of the wicked and the glory of the righteous in a purified world under the personal reign of Jehovah. But for the coming of Jehovah or the Jewish Messiah the Christians substituted Jesus' second advent, for the Jews the Christians, and for the Gentiles the unbelieving world.⁵ There were also some other features of subordinate importance, such as the Antichrist, the first resurrection, and the reign of a thousand years.⁶

These ideas appealed powerfully to the longings and the imagi-

⁵ *Ep. ad Diognetum* vii, x; *Hermas Pastor Sim.* i-iv; *Clement I.* xxiii, xl.

⁶ Renan, *Antichrist*; *Didache* xvi; Polycarp *Ep. ad Phil.* vii; Barnabas *Ep.* iv; Papias vi; Justin *Dial. cum Tryph.* lxxx.

nations of the common people. The periods of suffering, through which the Christians passed up to the time of Constantine, kept these expectations alive and stimulated the production of new apocalypses—often pseudonymous, since apostolical sanction was needed. From Clement of Rome to Athanasius, with few exceptions, the writers speak of these things. The literalness⁷ of some of these descriptions and the feeling exhibited toward the enemies of the faith are sometimes fearful. No person who has read the famous passage of the fiery Tertullian in the peroration of his *De Spectaculis*,⁸ where he gloats over the prospect of seeing the persecutors of Christians and the wicked “groaning now in the lowest darkness” or “tossing in the fiery billows,” can wonder that, if these views are representative, Christians were often regarded as the enemies of the human race.

Until the Christian apologists and the opponents of Gnosticism attempted to commend the faith to human reason there was no felt need of justifying these sentiments by philosophy. The certainty of these future events reposed on definite divine promises. And as for their possibility, the power of God to do as he had promised was not to be questioned. This has always been the final answer to such doubts. Moreover, there was a certain moral power in this view, for there is no symbol of the value of spiritual realities more expressive than the picture of the transformation of the universe at the behest of the demands of faith. It appealed to the oriental temper (so manifest in Gnosticism and Manicheism) that held the present world to be evil and destined to be broken up by the redemption of the good elements in it from the evil. But the orthodox Christians were unable to accept the corollary to this view, namely, that the origin of the present world is traceable to an evil being or beings, because thereby their confidence in the sovereignty of a good God would be imperiled.⁹

For the purely apocalyptic view of the future life interest in the world is exhausted in the representation of the coming catastrophe. Such a doctrine could not stand alone very long since it

⁷ E.g., the writings of Lactantius and Commodianus.

⁸ Cap. xxx.

⁹ E.g., Clement I. xxvi, xl; Justin *Apol.* I. xviii.

lacked a reasoned and truly moral apprehension of the course of the universe and of human history. Thinkers soon appeared who saw that Christianity needed a vindication of its faith by means of an interpretation of the world as a revelation of the moral truths the new religion taught. This reinforcement was received through the moral philosophy of the early Christian apologists.

A second type of doctrine of the future is seen in the works of the apologists of the second century, of whom Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Aristides, Theophilus, and Tatian are the chief. (Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian faced a different situation.) These men appear to have accepted Christianity mainly because it established for them the worth of the moral life, which skepticism had undermined. If they also, as it seems certain, cherished the hope of the end, it was not for the sake of those expected events in themselves, as it was in the case of the apocalyptists, but it was because they were able thereby to justify their estimate of moral principles. Hence their view of the future life was concerned solely, in the last analysis, with the assurance that the righteous would be finally rewarded and the wicked punished. The reward was rather vaguely conceived as endless happiness and the punishment as destruction—generally viewed at first, it seems, as a painful process of extinction, but later conceived as endless suffering.¹⁰

To these men Christianity was a divinely revealed philosophy. They sought to give a simple *rationale* of the faith thus: Immanent in the world is a supreme spiritual principle identical in character with the rational principle in man, the Logos. It is at the same time the principle of self-revelation in the Supreme Being, who, in himself, apart from the Logos, is unknowable. This Logos became personal in order to the creation of the world and filled it with himself. The Logos (reason) in man enables him to interpret the world and discover in it the laws of life (cf. Stoicism). But through the machinations of the evil demons (here the popular demonologies are utilized to explain the moral dualism) the truth has been obscured and mixed with error in the minds of men and their morality has been debased. The proof thereof lies in the doctrines and morals

¹⁰ Barnabas xx, xxi; Ignatius *Ad Smyr.* ii; *Ep. ad Diog.* vii-x; Justin *Apol.* I. viii, lii; Lactantius *Institutiones* VII. x, xi.

of heathen religions. But in order to rescue men from their sins the Logos had revealed the truth of life. It is found in part in the Hebrew scriptures. Finally he had come personally into the world in Jesus Christ and revealed the truth perfectly. Men are free to obey or disobey it. Their obedience or disobedience will be rewarded by eternal life or eternal destruction.

While the popular eschatology described above has no inner connection with this theory, it was practically indispensable, for two reasons. The first is that, while this philosophy is mostly independent of Christianity, it was in sympathy with the moral vigor of Christianity and easily came to regard itself as identical with the faith. The second reason is that this philosophy of common-sense needed the *real*, the evidence of palpable fact, for the proof of its truth. It appealed to the facts of ancient Hebrew history and the prophetic predictions of Jesus' career and of the founding of the church. The correspondence of the facts related in the Christian "memoirs" with the ancient prophecies established the truth of the Christian teachings and therewith of their philosophy. In reply to the objection that many predictions remained unfulfilled, they said the second advent would complete the fulfilment.¹¹ Hence the emphasis on the events of the approaching end as likewise palpable facts.

Certain difficulties confronted this rationalist view. The immortality of the soul seems to follow from its identity with the principle of reason, but how then shall it be said that eternal life is the reward of righteousness? They were not agreed on the point. While Theophilus¹² approvingly says, "By most men the soul is called immortal," yet he has to say that immortality is the reward of faith and is obtained by a resurrection. Tatian¹³ denies point-blank that the soul is immortal: "It dies and is dissolved with the body but rises again at the end of the world with the body" to receive "death by punishment in immortality" or to live in blessedness. The epistle to Diognetus,¹⁴ of about the same time, says: "The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tenement," it is "not of the body."

Their theory makes no place for a bodily resurrection, but they

¹¹ Justin *Apol.* I. lii.

¹³ *Ad Græcos* xiii; cf. vi.

¹² *Ad Autolycum* II. xix; cf. I. vii.

¹⁴ VI; cf. Harnack, *op. cit.*, II, 213.

clung to the tradition and argued for it as necessary for the vindication of righteousness since the body shared in the acts of the soul. The resurrection of Christ's body attested his message and assured our resurrection in the body.¹⁵ The bodily resurrection holds, in this theory, an external relation to the faith.

The apologist's view of salvation was that as ignorance is the source of error, evil, corruption, and death, so also knowledge is the ultimate source of incorruption and immortality. This Greek view of salvation was strengthened by the infusion of the deep mystical spirit of the Orient. But the knowledge that the Oriental cherished was not mere rational thought. It was something higher—a mysterious communication of insight or superconscious illumination that introduced man into the spiritual life. From the second to the third century there was a development in philosophy from rationalism to mysticism. The works of the apologists were affected by it. They were anxious to assure men of immortality. They paid little attention to the question *how* it could be imparted, although Justin's doctrine of the incarnation of the Logos opened the way for him to show that thereby a transformation of human nature was effected.¹⁶ There are hints of such a change occurring at the instant of the incarnation and at baptism,¹⁷ as well as occasional references to the communication of a divine quality to human nature to prevent its return to corruption, but these men were too much interested in questions of proof to develop this idea. This task was reserved to the theologians of Alexandria. Here we pass to the third type of theory of the future life.

The deep longing for unity with the divine finds utterance in post-apostolic times as early as Ignatius.¹⁸ How often he expresses his desire for death in order that he might "attain unto God"! It was a common feeling among the martyrs. In the second and third centuries it became the root of two opposed theories of the world among Christians. The first is known as Gnosticism,¹⁹

¹⁵ Pseudo-Justin *De Resur.* ix. Cf. Tert. *De Resur. Carnis* xiv, l, lvii, lx.

¹⁶ *Apol.* i. 66. Cf. Irenaeus iv. 6. 2.

¹⁷ Justin *Apol.* I. lxi. Cf. Tertullian *De Bapt.* i, iv, xii; Iren. *Adv. Haer.* i. 21. 1.

¹⁸ *Ep.* i. 1, 2, 7.

¹⁹ See Mansel, *The Gnostic Heresies*; C. W. King, *The Gnostics and their Remains*; Harnack, *op. cit.*, II, iv.

a phantasmagoria of mythology, legend, history, science, and speculation that, as presented by Irenaeus²⁰ and Hippolytus, seems too absurd to endanger the Christian faith. It metamorphosed the common Christian traditions so as to unite them with other religions and to find thereby the truth of all religion. That is to say, it sought to furnish a secret knowledge that would satisfy the longing for redemption. This was ministered by mystic rites by which the soul enters upon the higher life that culminates in the final separation of matter and spirit. This dualistic view of redemption involved a dual origin of the world and two Gods at least, for the good God could not be the creator of evil matter. It distinguished between Jesus and Christ, that is, it was the first movement that posited a dual nature in Jesus Christ; it denied real death to the Christ and denied the physical resurrection of Jesus. Therewith was annulled all future bodily resurrection, a real second advent, and future judgment. Its rejection of the Hebrew scriptures and of the creatorship of the supreme God made its repudiation by the church inevitable.

Nevertheless it was truly dangerous, not only because it appealed to men of speculative mind, but because its pessimistic view of matter and its affirmation that Christianity is final redemption appealed to that deep desire to escape from the bondage of present existence, which was so widespread. Already it was becoming common to regard baptism²¹ as a vehicle for the transmission of the new life and to add other ceremonies to the simple original observance of this rite and the Supper.²² Gnosticism only perfected the movement. It was largely the fear of Gnosticism that led Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Lactantius, and other Catholics to insist on the materiality of Jesus' body, the resurrection of his body (even his very flesh) and ours,²³ and to set forth the apocalyptic visions as most certain future matters of fact.

The actual victory over Gnosticism, so far as it was won at all, was won by the alliance of Christianity with neo-Platonism. This

²⁰ *Ad. Haer.* I. v.

²¹ Justin *Apol.* I. lxi. Cf. Tert. *De Spec.* iv. *De Corona* iii. Const. *S. Apos.* ii. 3, 7; iii. 16, 17.

²² *Didache* x. 2; ix. 2; Ignat. *Ad Eph.* xx; *Ad Philad.* iv; Justin *Apol.* lxxv, lxxvi.

²³ Tert. *De Resur. Car.* xxiv *et passim*.

philosophy of religion likewise regarded man's great need as spiritual redemption and also appealed to the mystical temper. It also said matter is evil, but only relatively evil. It taught a final monism: matter has come to be through a series of emanations from that which is above all existence; there will be a reversion and return to the ultimate unity. Salvation is accomplished by this reverse process. Now, since evil, that is, material existence, is non-being, sin arises from the delusion of mistaking non-existence for true existence. Hence on the side of experience salvation is by enlightenment. This enlightenment is not to be identified with the ordinary processes of knowledge based on sense-perception, but it is supersensible knowledge of superessential being, vision, ecstasy, immediate contact with ultimate reality. It is plain that the end to be sought is incorruption, immortality, pure being, which is identical with pure, absolute knowledge.

While this experience might be enjoyed by the "perfect" in moments of ecstasy, for the many it could be imparted only through "mysteries," rites that were supposed to convey to the subject of them the secret illumination sought for. At this point Gnosticism and neo-Platonism were at one. The affiliation of Christianity upon this philosophy was accomplished mainly through Clement and Origen, teachers of the Christian catechetical school in Alexandria.²⁴ Instead of repudiating the gnostic contention they professed to set forth the true Gnosis. Clement holds not only that the world is ultimately spiritual but that its processes serve the purpose of enlightenment. All suffering, all punishment is disciplinary, remedial, purificatory, in this world and the next.²⁵ All men must be purged by fire—not literal flame, but mental pain.²⁶ Chiliasm, literal resurrection, and all their accompaniments disappear.

Origen gave a systematic development to these propositions. He worked out an imposing scheme of the origin, course, and end of the universe according to the principles of neo-Platonism, and because he believed it was in no respects different from the Christian faith, he presented it in the terms of that faith: God, the source

²⁴ See Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria*; Harnack, *op. cit.*, II, vi.

²⁵ Strom. IV. xxi-xxiv; VII. vi.

²⁶ Paed. I. viii; Strom. I. xxvi, xxvii.

of all being, is righteous, that is, good. All true being is therefore good. Evil exists only in defect. God's creatures were all good, and therefore free; but they were imperfect and might fall. Many of them fell. The worlds were created for the fallen and were suited to their condition. That is, the worlds were made for the purpose of raising them again. Life is a disciplinary struggle upward. Jesus Christ, Logos, the Son of God, is the mediator of this return by his union with a human body through a pure human soul. He is the principle of the final and perfect restoration. Ultimately, therefore, all things will return to the pure spiritual realm, when all ignorance, error defect, sin shall have been removed.²⁷

God's justice, therefore, is purificatory, both here and hereafter. The souls purified in this life ascend at death to the divine abode. The others go to a purgatorial region until by the cleansing fires of the soul they also have been purified. Ultimately all men, demons, and even the devil will be restored.²⁸ At this point, however, Origen makes a concession to the popular view by saying that some may be eternally punished in the sense that through sin they may have lost some capacities irrecoverably.²⁹

This system stands in glaring contrast with the popular eschatology. It annulled chiliasm, the second advent, a real resurrection, the final judgment, the separation of the wicked from the righteous. Yet Origen did not shrink from attempting to reconcile his theory with the common views. He held to the traditional statements but thought that his theory brought out their inner meaning. He appealed to the scriptures of the church and believed that his philosophy interpreted their true spiritual import. He unfolded a method of interpretation that yielded three senses corresponding to the three stages of human attainment.³⁰ The "somatic," physical sense corresponds with mere faith in sensible facts (here is the apocalyptic, realistic view of the end); the moral sense corresponds with subjection to law (here is the doctrine of final rewards); the spiritual sense corresponds with the higher knowledge, which is

²⁷ See Bigg, *op. cit.*, VI; Harnack, *op. cit.*, II, vi.

²⁸ *De Princ.* i. 6. 1-4; ii. 10. 3; ii. 11. 6, 8; iii. 6. 1-9.

²⁹ So Bigg interprets him, *op. cit.*, 233 f.

³⁰ Cf. *Contra Celsum*, vii. 46.

immortality. The method is the allegorical; for to Origen the whole meaning of earthly, temporal, material existence is in its mirroring the heavenly, eternal, and spiritual. Thus the whole plan of redemption seeks to elevate intelligent beings to pure spirit.

Origen's system represents the trend of the time. He set for succeeding thinkers the task of unifying the current ideas of the future life. We shall see that the theoretical task was never accomplished by theologians. The practical unification of the three types of doctrine was the work of the churchman. Our next study will endeavor to discover how it was accomplished.

